

Strategy Research Project

Breaking the Toxic Leadership Paradigm in the U.S. Army

by

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United States Army



United States Army War College
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BREAKING THE TOXIC LEADERSHIP PARADIGM IN THE U.S. ARMY

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ABSTRACT

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A disturbing trend has developed within the Army, evidenced by several brigade-level commanders being relieved of duty because of toxic leadership practices. The destructive actions of these senior leaders have provided renewed interest into this leadership area because of the prevalence and seriousness of consequences such leadership failures cause. Recent studies and surveys, including the 2009-2010 Annual Survey of Army Leaders conducted by the Center for Army Leadership, validated the presence of toxic leadership within the Army's ranks. This issue has caught the attention of senior Army leaders who seem focused on fixing systems and processes in order to root these negative leaders from the ranks. This paper explores the concept of toxic leadership, examines recent examples in the United States Army, and discusses the potential to rid the service of this leadership flaw. An analysis of current data will identify how large of a problem toxic leadership is in the Army today. The paper concludes with providing recommendations for identifying toxic leaders and ways to affect Army culture to prevent this destructive leadership practice in the future.

BREAKING THE TOXIC LEADERSHIP PARADIGM IN THE U.S. ARMY

We can't have leaders who are risk averse, we can't have leaders who are micro-managers and don't trust their subordinates -- [that's] the kind of toxic leadership that we can't afford.¹

—General Raymond T. Odierno
Chief of Staff, U.S. Army

A disturbing trend has developed within the Army, evidenced by several brigade-level commanders being relieved of duty because of toxic leadership practices. The destructive actions of these senior leaders have provided renewed interest into this leadership area because of the prevalence and seriousness of consequences such leadership failures cause. The damage caused by toxic leaders is unmistakable. At one end of the spectrum, it erodes trust, reduces effectiveness, and affects Soldier well-being and retention; under the most extreme conditions, it can lead to mutiny and even death.² Although there were four Army senior officers relieved in 2011 alone, the threat of toxic leadership is certainly not new in the Army.³ Back in 2003, then Secretary of the Army Thomas E. White invited the U.S. Army War College to research and, “address how the Army could effectively assess leaders to detect those who might have destructive leadership styles.”⁴ While the phenomenon is not a new challenge in the military, never before have the destructive leadership styles of those trusted with the privilege of brigade command gained such attention.

To illustrate this issue's importance, the Center for Army Leadership's Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL) from 2009 to 2010 validated and highlighted the presence of toxic leadership within the Army's ranks. The survey found that more than 80 percent of Army officers, noncommissioned officers, and civilians surveyed, “had

directly observed a 'toxic' leader in the last year and that about 20 percent of the respondents said that they had worked directly for one."⁵ This issue has caught the attention of senior Army leaders who seem focused on fixing systems and processes to resolve the impact of these negative leaders. Soon after taking the reins as the new Army Chief of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, now the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff noted that one of his top priorities was to focus on the human dimension and leader development in an attempt to negate the growing problem.⁶ Since then, the Army has taken initial measures to begin addressing the issue of toxic leadership within its ranks.

As the Army transitions from over ten years of combat operations to a garrison focus while faced with reduced budgets, a reduction in force and other serious challenges, the need for qualified, caring, effective leaders is more important now than ever. This paper broadly explores the concept of toxic leadership, analyzes data to identify the scope of the problem, and examines recent examples in the United States Army. The paper concludes with providing recommendations for identifying toxic leaders and ways to affect Army culture to prevent this destructive leadership practice in the future.

Leadership Overview

Leadership is an extremely powerful force—typically viewed in the Army as a powerfully good force. At its best, leadership is pervasive, persuasive, persistent, uplifting and unifying; at its worst, it poisons with pedanticism, posturing, and self-importance.⁷ Trustworthy leaders are caring and moral; they are trusted to place the goals of the organization and the well being of their followers first.⁸ They effectively lead organizations focused on progress and productivity. The ability to influence others, by

providing purpose, direction and motivation, while working to accomplish some very dangerous and complex missions while striving to improve the organization is the essence of Army leadership.⁹ Toxic leadership runs counter to those basic leadership tenants. Like any disease, toxic leadership can be contagious. Considering that one toxic leader can negatively impact hundreds of Soldiers, and those abused subordinates can in-turn negatively affect countless others, drives home the large impact and imperative that there is no place for these destructive leaders in the Army.¹⁰

Senior leaders have emphasized several important initiatives across the Army over the past decade including the Profession of Arms campaign, an effort to examine what it means to be a member of a profession and a professional. The concept of the Army as a Profession of Arms outlines several essential attributes, which professional Soldiers must possess and display in their daily lives. These critical attributes include skill, trust, leadership, character, and duty.¹¹ Army Field Manual 1 states that Army leaders “must demonstrate exemplary conduct in their professional and personal lives” and also, “adopt and internalize the Army Values.”¹² Those values -- Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage -- form the foundation of Army culture. They define the character and guide the actions of Soldiers and leaders when making decisions, solving problems and executing their daily responsibilities.¹³ We expect that leaders will automatically live the Army Values through personal action and word, but that is not always the case. Toxic leaders fail to live in accordance with these ascribed values and serve as negative, counterproductive agents adversely affecting organizational trust, morale and cohesion. Ultimately, these destructive leadership behaviors erode the foundation of what it means to be a

professional Soldier serving in a values-based institution focused on a Profession of Arms.

The Scope of the Problem

To what extent toxic leadership exists in the Army is up for debate depending on the way data is gathered. As Reed and Bullis pointed out in their study of 172 students at the U.S. Army War College in 2003 on the impact of destructive leadership, toxic statistics obtained are biased because they under report the actual numbers as only the 'survivors' are polled.¹⁴ Virtually every student surveyed during their project indicated they had served under a toxic leader sometime during their career.¹⁵ The data also suggested that toxic leadership is not just an Army issue but a problem across all of the military services.¹⁶ The recent CASAL survey conducted between 2009 and 2010 of over 30,000 military and civilian leaders across the Active Army and Reserve Component validated Reed and Bullis' earlier findings. The mere fact that the Army conducted a survey of that magnitude is, according to Reed, a signal in itself of the Army's rising interest on the topic.¹⁷ This leads to the conclusion that this under-reported and relatively under-analyzed phenomenon is alive and well in the Army. From these studies, one can assume there are numerous toxic leaders operating in the force because their superiors appreciated their ability to get things done, were toxic themselves, or did not have the courage to take action.

Defining and Characterizing Toxic Leadership

The study of toxic leadership has increased significantly over recent years in a variety of forums. Researchers, academia, and several laypersons have attempted to define it, categorize its behavioral dimensions and character traits, determine methods to measure it, and identify ways to treat and eradicate it. These efforts have produced a

wide-range of conclusions. Jean Lipman-Blumen provides a plausible definition for toxic leadership in her book “*The Allure of Toxic Leaders*.” According to Lipman-Blumen, toxic leaders are defined as:

Leaders who engage in numerous destructive behaviors and who exhibit certain dysfunctional personal characteristics. To count as toxic, these behaviors and qualities of character must inflict some reasonably serious and enduring harm on their followers and their organizations. The intent to harm others or to enhance the self at the expense of others distinguishes seriously toxic leaders from the careless or unintentional toxic leaders, who also cause negative effects.¹⁸

To properly frame the toxic leadership problem, researchers believe it is necessary to conduct an initial examination of the dysfunctional personality traits, characteristics, and behaviors, which Lipman-Blumen suggests defines the toxic leader.

Research and published articles have generated a long list of dysfunctional and negative personality characteristics from which toxic behaviors often develop. Lipman-Blumen suggests a lack of integrity, insatiable ambition, enormous ego, arrogance, amorality, avarice, irresponsibility, cowardice, and incompetence.¹⁹ In her book “*Toxic Leaders: When Organizations Go Bad*,” Marcia Whicker also identifies other characteristics, including deep-seated inadequacy, selfish values, deception, maladjustment, malcontent, malfunctioning, malevolent, and malicious.²⁰ As Colonel Denise Williams pointed out in her 2005 analysis of the topic, “In most cases of toxic leadership, the leader will present not just one, but a combination of the traits. Intuitively, the more of these traits the leader displays, the more toxic the leader is considered.”²¹

All of these aforementioned dysfunctional personality characteristics manifest themselves into various forms of destructive behavior, which has a negative impact on followers, teams, and organizations. Some of these behaviors include violating basic

standards of human rights, undermining independence, stifling constructive criticism, misleading through use of untruths, engaging in unethical, illegal, and criminal acts; maliciously setting constituents against each other; and promoting incompetence, cronyism, and corruption.²² The CASAL report on toxic leadership also identified additional toxic behaviors, which included micromanagement, mean-spiritedness and aggressiveness, rigid or poor decision-making, and poor attitude or example.²³ As Lipman-Blumen points out, the level of a leader's 'toxicity' often times depends on how many of these negative attributes and behaviors manifest themselves in outward behavior. She also notes that there are times when effective 'non-toxic' leaders occasionally engage in milder forms of toxicity without causing great or enduring harm.²⁴ Regardless, the harm and detrimental impact these toxic behaviors cast on individuals and organizations are systemic and enduring.

Impacts and Potential Causes of Toxic Behaviors

The consequences of toxic leadership on individuals and organizations are all too real. As Reed discussed, toxic leaders do not add value to the organizations they lead; rather, they have a negative impact on unit climate, erode unit cohesion and deflate esprit de corps. They cause unnecessary organizational stress, emphasize negative values and create an environment of hopelessness. He also points out Soldiers who work for toxic leaders will become disenchanted with the Army, which has a potentially negative impact on the retention of quality personnel. The worst result is that toxic leaders, if left unchecked, can create a lineage of future toxic leaders through their negative mentoring.²⁵ In her analysis of leader toxicity, Kathie Pelletier identified other potential impacts including workplace deviance by subordinates, increases in turnover intentions, and individual psychological distress, which could lead to deteriorations in

performance and morale.²⁶ Reed validated Pelletier's assertions, noting Soldiers indicated lower retention rates, domestic violence, absenteeism, increased alcohol consumption, drug consumption, lack of productivity, and lack of motivation are all potential consequences within the Army.²⁷ One has to wonder if the impact of toxic leadership is so extremely negative, why anyone would engage in such behavior in the first place.

Numerous researchers have set out to determine why leaders engage in toxic behavior. As Colonel Williams pointed out in her study, one explanation involves deficits associated with psychologist Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow categorized human needs into a five-level pyramid with physiological needs forming the base followed by safety needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs, and finally, self actualization. Maslow theorized that people could only realize and attain self actualization when needs at the lower levels were satisfied.²⁸ Those who believe in Maslow's theory posits that if lower level needs, such as physical and safety concerns are not met, toxic behavior ensues. As an example, a toxic leader who is not getting basic safety needs satisfied might have issues with insecurity, fear, and obsession leading to toxic behaviors aimed at compensating for the absence. Similarly, a deficit in an individual's love and belonging needs manifests into emptiness, loneliness, isolation, and incompleteness in the toxic leader.²⁹

From another perspective Doctor Karen Wilson-Starks, an expert in corporate leadership, suggests that toxic leaders emerge because they were mentored by toxic leaders themselves. These poor role models operate under a faulty definition of leadership and consequently 'groom' toxic subordinates in their own image over time.

Wilson-Starks also suggests that toxic leaders have unresolved psychological issues, such as fear of the unknown, fear of failure, feeling of inadequacy, lack of confidence, and extreme overconfidence, that they avoid by exercising toxic leadership.³⁰ Di Genio suggests that toxic leaders simply lack competence in their area of expertise, which breeds a lack of confidence in their abilities as a leader. This lack of confidence and incompetence manifests into insecurity and subsequently a toxic leadership style when managing their constituency.³¹ Regardless of why it happens, one has to ask why toxic leaders and their associated destructive tendencies are not ‘unmasked’ and eliminated from the Army, an organization that emphasizes trust and leadership above all else?

There are many reasons toxic leaders are able to thrive in the Army. Reed points out that the military culture, personnel policies and Army values all play a part in allowing the toxic leaders to be pushed through the system.³² The military culture emphasizes respect for the rank, even if the leader is not respected. The propensity for members of the military to ‘soldier through’ to accomplish the mission, regardless of the challenges perpetuates a ‘suck it up’ mentality. In an ironic twist, Army Values—loyalty in particular—are also potentially enablers for toxic leaders. Because of a large sense of loyalty to unit and other leaders, Soldiers are often conflicted about blowing the whistle on the destructive leader. Personnel policies, such as the normal movement of personnel every two to three years create a ‘wait them out’ mentality amongst subordinates. As Reed surmises, “it’s only a matter of time before the suffering Soldier or the toxic leader leaves.”³³ Inaction on the part of the toxic leader’s boss is also a factor. Because toxic individuals tend to reap immediate results, they bring credit to their

boss who in turn potentially casts a blind eye to the behavior for productivity and success.

In essence, destructive leadership is a manifestation of a few basic toxic leadership styles. In his article, “The Toxic Boss” John Di Genio, succinctly grouped toxic leadership styles into seven categories: The Narcissist, The Explosive, The Gangster, The Turncoat-Backstabber-Accuser (TBA), The Casanova, The Invertebrate, and The Zombie.³⁴ Each of these styles are now discussed and, where appropriate, examples provided of Army brigade commanders that displayed a particular style.

Toxic Leadership Styles

The Narcissist defines a toxic leader characterized by being full of them self, who has an extremely large ego requiring those that serve them to provide constant stroking and flattery. They are not receptive to ideas and opinions of others. Further, they think they know it all and are the subject matter expert on everything. They do not handle failure well and will blame anyone and everyone—except themselves—when things go wrong. Those who work for these conceited leaders are engaged in an I-win, you-lose arrangement, often times filled with sarcasm and finger pointing.³⁵ One of the brigade commanders relieved during 2011 provides a fitting example of this type of toxic leadership style. Colonel Frank Zachar commanded the 172nd Infantry Brigade in Germany until his toxic practices and negative command climate led to his relief. According to the U.S. Army Europe report, four of the six battalion commanders and four of five command sergeants major in the 172nd believed he had a negative leadership style. Statements from Zachar’s subordinates indicated his leadership style was leadership by intimidation and very negative, caustic, vindictive, and disingenuous. Brigadier General Wells, the investigating officer indicated that Zachar’s leadership style

demonstrated, “arrogance, deception, and threatening behavior... [and did] not foster a positive command climate.”³⁶

The troubling part of Colonel Zachar is that this was obviously years in the making. From unofficial blog responses generated in reaction to the stories about his relief, one would learn that he displayed similar toxic practices as a company commander and battalion commander. In one post, a writer claims, “I served under this man when he was a company commander. I can attest to his unsuitability as a leader.”³⁷ The individual goes on to describe how Colonel Zachar ran a unit where the number of absent without leaves, drunken driving incidents, suicides and homicides, and domestic issues were the most of any unit he had seen in his twenty years of service. The individual also describes an incident where Colonel Zachar, “locked down the company for an extended period of time due to his shortcomings,” and was “able to justify his actions and avert the blame to his entire company.”³⁸ Another individual noted that as a battalion commander, Zachar had similar types of complaints as he did as a brigade commander.³⁹

Colonel Harry Tunnel’s command of the 5th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division provides another example of narcissistic leadership. According to reports, the brigade was, “rife with lapses of discipline, misdirection, and mixed signals about its mission in one of the most important regions in Afghanistan.”⁴⁰ Although he was not relieved of command, Tunnel’s subordinates described him as “introverted, stubborn, unapproachable, close-minded, and as a person who thinks he knows more than most.”⁴¹ This attitude led Tunnel to focus his unit’s efforts on counter-guerrilla tactics while completely ignoring his high headquarters’ direct guidance to conduct

counterinsurgency operations. Tunnel had, “limited social interaction with his officers and NCO’s, and rarely counseled or mentored his subordinates,” according to the 532-page report prepared by Brigadier General Stephen Twitty, the investigative officer appointed to review the unit’s command climate. The review came in light of several negative occurrences within the brigade, including unit Soldiers being accused of murdering Afghan civilians ‘for sport.’ While the investigation occurred after Tunnel had already relinquished command, Twitty indicated that, “if still in command, I would recommend that Colonel Tunnel be relieved of his responsibilities as a brigade commander.”⁴² Like possibly so many others before him, Colonel Tunnel represents a toxic leader who snuck through the system.

The Explosive (the Bully) defines a toxic leader characterized by extreme moodiness and unpredictable behavior. One-minute things are fine, the next they hurl insults, sarcasm and humiliation at their subordinates. They rule by techniques such as anger, fear, intimidation, hatred, threats and vengeance and are nothing more than tyrannical megalomaniacs. They lead to high rates of personnel turnover, low morale and often times, low productivity.⁴³ Colonel Phillip Stemple, the former commander of the 67th Battlefield Surveillance Brigade, who was relieved from command in April of 2011, provides a perfect example of this type of toxic leadership style. The Army 15-6 investigation, which led to Stemple’s relief, indicated he would, “publically belittle, berate or disrespect fellow Soldiers,” and “...often made disparaging remarks based on race, religion and gender.” Major General William Garrett, the chief of staff of U.S. Forces-Iraq and investigating officer indicated that Stemple, “created an overall environment of

anxiety and degradation in which open communication and professional discussion were nearly impossible and members of his command lived in abject fear.”⁴⁴

The Gangster defines a toxic leader characterized as being a power monger. These leaders attempt to hold onto what they have by using their people as instruments to secure their power and position. They do not like to be in debt to anyone nor want others to know their weaknesses; therefore, they prefer others to fear them rather than to admire them. These leaders are extremely secretive, have very few confidants, and will never tell everything to a single person. They hoard and protect information, making sure subordinates only have the knowledge they need to accomplish their piece of the mission. These leaders get nervous when they see superiors or someone from outside the organization recognizing one of their employees for doing well, as this is a threat to their power.⁴⁵ In the military, these sneaky toxic types are hard to unmask because of their subversive and manipulative techniques. Because they do not express themselves through typical toxic negative, outward manifestations, they cloak their destructiveness well. Due to the gray area this type of leader generally operates from, it makes it difficult to hold them accountable for the damage they potentially inflict within their organization.

The *Turncoat, Backstabber, Accuser (TBA)* defines a toxic leader characterized by a lack of loyalty to subordinates, who will quickly sell them out to save themselves. These leaders are extremely insecure and paranoid while being quick to find fault with their team. They will bad-mouth their subordinates to others to shift blame for failure. Their danger lies in their fakeness and guile. They approach with an insincere smile rather than a snarl; are polite instead of mean; and use kind words rather than vulgarities, but because of their lack of loyalty they are treacherous to their employees.

While the explosive leader is in your face, the TBA leader is spreading rumors and engaged in other clandestine acts in and out of the organization to cause hate and discontent.⁴⁶ This leader will have a hard time reestablishing trust within the organization, and this behavior was highlighted earlier by Colonel Zachar.

Unfortunately, in the Army, loyalty is the most important of values as it provides the foundation for cohesion, morale, and many other organizational elements. When loyalty is lost, erosion of the foundation occurs and is often not repairable.

The Casanova defines a toxic leader who engages in a harassing behavior, be it sexual or otherwise. The result of this behavior is a loss of trust, credibility, and confidence in the leader.⁴⁷ Colonel James H. Johnson III, the former commander of the 173rd Airborne Brigade is a perfect example of a brigade commander relieved for displaying this toxic leadership style. As the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper reported in June of 2011, Johnson had an inappropriate relationship with the wife of his cultural adviser while deployed in Iraq. His harassing behavior, along with several other immoral and illegal activities, led to his relief in March of 2011.⁴⁸

The Invertebrate defines a toxic leader characterized by indecisiveness, personal preservation, and an inability to take a decisive stance on important issues. They spend an inordinate amount of time trying to find the safe middle ground in hopes of staying in the good graces of superiors. Meanwhile, their talented subordinates flounder in mediocrity because of a lack of action or guidance. Fear controls their actions, or lack thereof, and they tend to lose respect and credibility over time with superiors, peers, and subordinates.

The *Zombie* defines a toxic leader characterized by status quo complacency, lethargy, absenteeism, and a lack of passion and enthusiasm. They suck the life out of an organization because of their lack of action, constant absence, and lack of motivation. They perpetuate a sense of apathy within the organization, which causes employees to be indifferent to the demands of external organizations.

Ways to Counteract Toxic Leadership Styles

Each of the aforementioned toxic leadership styles causes destructive results and present serious challenges for employees. Di Genio offers techniques individuals under the supervision of these destructive leaders may employ to counter their toxic styles. For example, when dealing with The Narcissist, the best way to handle this dysfunctional leader is to make your idea, their idea and to be a very doting subordinate. While you will get little credit from this toxic leader, hopefully, others will notice your worth to the organization.⁴⁹ The best countermeasure for The Bully leader is self-control and standing ones ground.⁵⁰ This proves to be problematic in the military, where rank structures often times prevent subordinates from 'standing up' to this type of leader. Di Genio insists you cannot change or counter The Gangster leader; you can only hope to avoid and survive them.⁵¹ The TBA, on the other hand, is susceptible to straight out confrontation, so the best technique is to calmly and tactfully confront them directly when they employ their dishonest methods.⁵² When dealing with The Casanova, subordinates should resist the harassing behavior and report it to the proper authorities immediately, which should end this destructive behavior.⁵³ This is especially true in the military, where there are numerous regulations, which prohibit this form of behavior. Subordinates should be courageous and persistent in an attempt to force The Invertebrate to take a stand and make a decision, which through persistence has the

potential to modify this style.⁵⁴ In the Army, subordinates should use the entire chain of command as a means to encourage this type of cowardly leader to take a stand and make a decision. Further ensuring this leader has the needed information available along with solid recommendations can potentially work to make them more constructive and useful to the organization. Finally, the best way to counteract The Zombie leader is through pure enthusiasm across the organization.⁵⁵ Soldiers can help rehabilitate this type of leader through vigorous team and morale building efforts aimed at breathing life and enthusiasm into the organization.

While it is useful for individuals to understand how they should deal with these different toxic leadership styles to survive, they should not have to worry about such matters. Ultimately, it is the organization's responsibility to ensure individuals under their employment have a positive work environment and climate from which to work. In an effort to improve leader development and rid toxic leaders from its ranks, the Army has begun to take action to do just that.

Analysis of Army Initiatives

In September of 2011, the Army instituted the first of what many believe to be several major initiatives aimed at improving leadership through self-development and limiting the amount of toxic leadership in the force. As part of a change to the Officer Evaluation Report (OER), all officers must initiate or complete a Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback (MSAF), also known as a 360 degree assessment. As the implementation memorandum indicates, "Although acknowledgement on the OER that a rated officer has initiated or completed and MSAF is required, the results of the MSAF will not be used as part of the formal evaluation of the rated officer."⁵⁶ Another professional development initiative is occurring at the Command and General Staff

College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Majors who attend the Intermediate Level Education course complete the L100 leadership course, which was revised over the past three years to include a large section on toxic leadership.⁵⁷ This effort provides future commanders exposure to a concept which until now has been largely ignored.

The Army's Center for Leadership Development is developing the Commander's Assessment Tool (CAT), an initiative started by then Army Chief of Staff General Dempsey. The intent of the CAT is to identify leaders who show signs of toxic behavior or characteristics. The tool will be populated by anonymous survey data provided by the officer, his peers, subordinates, and superiors and produce a snapshot report to identify destructive behaviors. Current plans indicate the report will be provided to command selections boards for input into their selection process. The pilot program is targeted for launch in fiscal year 2012 with a full implementation in 2013. Other proposals include further revising the Officer Evaluation Report, enhancing other professional military education (PME) courses, and more stringent guidance on command climate surveys.⁵⁸ At the time this paper is written, these last proposals have not yet been finalized.

Initial Army initiatives, on face value, appear to provide valid efforts at exposing and minimizing toxic leaders within the force. While emphasizing changes to PME courses to ensure the topic of toxic leadership is taught at all levels is a commendable way to educate the force about this destructive phenomenon, it is not enough. A real problem with the Army's current approach is that initial efforts appear to be focused on 'rehabbing' the toxic leader as opposed to exposing them for what and who they are. Several theorists believe that individuals with toxic tendencies lack self-awareness and are not open to or interested in changing their behavior. The only thing that motivates

them to change is pressure to change from their boss.⁵⁹ If this is the case, the identification of individuals who possess or display toxic tendencies should be the number one priority of effort. In the end, if the Army is serious about eliminating toxic leadership practices it must look at how to change its culture to one that is completely intolerant of the practice.

Affecting Army Culture to Fix the Problem

Changing the culture of an organization as large as the Army is no easy task. It is important to first understand differences between organizational climate and culture. Climate is defined as, “The feeling that is conveyed in a group by the physical layout and the way in which the members of the organization interact with each other.”⁶⁰ Climate is found at organizational levels, is more personality dependent, relatively quick to change, and is directly influenced by leaders throughout the organization, starting with the most senior. In writing on the aspect of command climate, retired Army Lieutenant General Lawson Magruder III stated that a positive command climate was, “a direct result of the influence and actions of the senior leader in the organization.”⁶¹ He identified several ingredients for a positive command climate, including senior leaders who provided vision and clear direction, a clear mission focus, powering down to subordinate leaders, an environment which emphasized and rewarded teamwork, and a sincere emphasis of caring by the senior leader.⁶² General Magruder was obviously referring to a positive, non-toxic leader creating a non-threatening environment where subordinates were allowed to use initiative and learn. While toxic leaders initially impact an organization’s climate, it is the organization culture that must be changed to ensure toxic behavior is stopped before it can begin to take hold.

Culture is much less personality dependent and takes a long time to change for it must cross all types of Army organizations and is not dependent on one leader's style. One of the primary responsibilities of strategic leaders is to influence and shape organizational culture. Dr. Edgar Schein, a prominent educator and researcher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology developed a model of organizational culture and a methodology for shaping that culture. The focus will now be on how the Army could use this methodology to begin reshaping its culture into one that is intolerant of toxic leadership practices.

Schein's model identified three levels or layers of an organization's culture: artifacts and behaviors, espoused norms and values, and underlying assumptions. Artifacts include tangible or verbal elements, including such things as dress and appearance, jargon, and history. Espoused norms and values are not physical in nature; they are the conscious considerations and unwritten rules, which dictate behavior within the organization. Assumptions are the actual values that the culture represents, which are typically so well integrated in the organizational dynamic that they are hard to recognize.⁶³ Misalignment in an organization occurs when the characteristics of these layers do not support the vision and direction of the organization. In the case of toxic leadership, one of the most obvious issues is that the toxic leader has not adopted the Army's espoused values. Schein asserted that culture could be modified by focusing on the three layers through the use of embedding and reinforcing mechanisms.

Embedding mechanisms emplace the assumptions into the organization, while reinforcing mechanisms support those embedded assumptions. Leaders play the critical role in instituting each of Schein's embedding mechanisms. Schein suggests that

leaders embed assumptions and influence culture through the things they pay attention to, how they react to incidents, how they allocate awards and resources, how they use role modeling and coaching, and finally, how they recruit, select, promote and attrit personnel.⁶⁴

In line with cultural embedding mechanisms, this paper recommends there must be a renewed focus within the Army on addressing toxic leadership that starts with a strong reemphasis of the Army Values coupled with powerful, frequent statements from senior leaders condemning toxic practices. This will ensure that Soldiers, officers and civilians first understand this sort of destructive behavior will not be tolerated. This leadership focus must resonate with all leaders, starting from the Chief of Staff and Sergeant Major of the Army down to the platoon leaders and platoon sergeants. When toxic behaviors are uncovered, the perpetrator should be dealt with swiftly and firmly. Elimination from the service should be the penalty for the most abusive and demeaning forms of this dysfunction, where people are not treated with dignity and respect.

This paper recommends that leaders must also emphasize programs and tools available to unmask toxic leaders. The MSAF/360 assessment would be a perfect tool to provide supervisors feedback on their subordinates' leadership shortfalls if the data was shared with the supervisor, and the individuals completing the assessment were selected by some means other than by the individual being assessed. Command climate surveys and individual interviews conducted as part of AR 1-201 directed Command Inspection Programs are also obvious methods leaders can determine if toxic leadership exists in units under their span of control.⁶⁵ Emphasis on the use of 'boss hotlines,' open door policies, and the Inspector General and Equal Opportunity

offices are also tools leaders can adapt for use to root out these destructive individuals. Another simple and effective effort in unmasking the toxic leader is through direct, personal involvement on the part of leaders. Leaders who employ the technique of 'management by walking around,' who constantly seek out candid feedback from their subordinates and keep a finger on the pulse of the climate in their organizations are the first line of defense against destructive leadership.

Leadership development programs are also effective culture embedding mechanisms related to what leaders focus on, as well as select, promote and attrit personnel. AR 350-1 highlights that, "Commanders are responsible for leader training and leader development programs in their units, and for providing a climate in which learning can take place."⁶⁶ Commanders are charged with assessing the performance of the officers in their units against leader competencies and provide information on their strengths, weaknesses, and developmental needs. They are also directed to develop the non commissioned officers under their charge using developmental programs to create self-aware, agile, competent, and confident leaders.⁶⁷ Hence, this paper recommends that toxic leadership must be incorporated into leader development programs, so the topic can be better understood, discussed, and dealt with. The bottom line is that leaders at every level of the Army must do everything they can, using every program at their disposal to establish a zero-tolerance mentality against toxic leadership to create a change in Army culture.

Once this mentality is in place, Schein suggests those assumptions are reinforced through the use of reinforcing mechanisms such as organizational design, systems and procedures, the design of physical space, and the use of formal

statements of organizational philosophy.⁶⁸ This paper recommends that a key reinforcing mechanisms the Army should focus on is doctrine. The Army's primary regulation covering leadership, AR 600-100, is absent of any discussion of toxic leadership. These destructive leadership practices must be codified in doctrine to define it, raise awareness and reinforce the culture of intolerance. Further, a system that must be changed is the evaluations for all leaders—officer, non commissioned officer, and civilian. These evaluation systems should be revamped to provide renewed emphasis on quality leadership, Army Values, and performance; emphasizing the opposite of what occurs in toxic leaders. Finally, programs of instruction for all leadership schools should include a block on negative, destructive leadership practices to again, reinforce the Army's culture of intolerance.

In conclusion, the Army relies on positive, productive, effective leadership to accomplish its many missions, all the while taking care of its people. Toxic leadership undermines the Army Values, erodes trust, and creates a negative organizational climate. Individuals who engage in this negative form of leadership are characterized by several dysfunctional traits, behaviors and leadership styles. The Army must make eradicating this destructive practice from its ranks a real priority by changing its culture into one marked by intolerance. Leaders at every level must focus on changing culture through embedding an anti-toxic mentality, utilizing every system and process at their disposal to unmask the toxic leader, and change programs and systems to reinforce the new cultural focus. The Army of the future faces many challenges; it should not tolerate challenges created by negative, destructive leaders within its ranks.

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